

Developments in Local Democracies

An Introduction

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Introduction

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THE QUALITY OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS AND CITIZENS is vital for western democracies. As a result of sociological, socio-economic and technological developments, these relations are changing and demand attention. Indeed, in many countries developments in government-citizen relations are on the scientific, political and governmental agendas - again, one could say.

In the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s, the issue of government-citizen relations attracted much attention, from academics as well as politicians and the general public. In those decades, the central topic of discussion was the position of individual citizens: their capabilities, their interests, and their attitudes. From the citizen's point of view, governments were large and bureaucratic, and barriers to public participation. Such barriers were creating legitimacy problems, which only could be solved by bridging the gap between the citizen and the government through democratisation, enhanced responsiveness and more openness.

In the 1980s and 90s, priorities changed: the attention for legitimacy decreased, and issues of effectiveness were assigned a higher place on the agenda. Measures such as privatisation, new management styles and 'contracting out' were taken. The citizen was treated as a 'client' of the public sector, as was exemplified by the

introduction of Citizen's Charters in the United Kingdom. In short: attention shifted from democracy and participation to efficiency and management.

In recent years, participation and democracy are political and scientific issues again, not instead of effectiveness, but besides it. At least in the Netherlands, authorities, especially local authorities, and scientists devote much energy to this theme. In an attempt to categorise the activities aimed at changing (local) democracy, Tops and Depla (1993) made a distinction between two strategies:

- *Perfecting democratic government.* This strategy aims to improve the effectiveness of government and the functioning of democracy, within the existing system of representative democracy, in which citizens appear as subjects, voters and clients.
- *Enhancing participation.*¹ This strategy consists of efforts to improve the participatory dimension of democracy. Its main characteristic is a fundamental change in the role of the citizen. In this strategy, citizens are being addressed to as creative contributors to the policy-making process. They are not so much as policy-makers, or rather 'policy co-producers'. The result is that the whole configuration of policy-makers and their role have to be reconsidered: the government is no longer the key actor in the policy-making process, but rather the facilitator of self-governing, self-steering citizens and associations of citizens. Key concepts in this "participatory strategy" process are social capital, self-steering and self-government, decentralisation of responsibilities, interdependencies between societal actors and civil society.

The research project

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The two processes of democratic renewal described above are not merely natural events, they are political choices or strategies as well. At least on first sight, some countries seem to focus on the improvement or even the perfection of representative democracy, whereas others emphasise the unavoidable imperfection of that system and recognise the necessity of going further. This last group of countries is experimenting with new modes of participation, such as a more direct system of democracy, or citizen participation. In the Netherlands some of these experiments are called interactive government, or "co-production of policy" (see section 4, below). In other European countries comparable processes seem to be underway, which are probably described in other terms or with reference to the national political-administrative tradition.

The disciplines of Public Administration and Political Science are challenged by these developments. How can we understand them? The main question is “to what extent do these developments in local democracy differ and how can those differences be explained?” At least two possible answers arise:

- Either there is a general tendency of similar measures being taken in almost every western democracy, whatever its history, political system, culture and structure, size, etc.
- Or major differences can be seen between countries, probably due to the same factors.

To begin answering this question, the Centre for Local Democracy has started an international comparative research project on reform in local democracy.² This book is an account of the first, exploratory phase of this project. The main purpose of the exploratory study has been to gain insight into:

- The actual developments and strategies
- The similarities and differences
- The basic concepts of democratic reform in the selected countries: the vocabulary and the language used.

We hope that this exploratory study will form the basis for future comparative research. By clarifying concepts, traditions and approaches, in other words, by looking for a common vocabulary, we hope to make a step towards an international comparison of processes that, up till now, have mainly been described in terms that relate to the specifics of individual countries.

Academic partners throughout Europe have assisted the research team (see Appendix C). They enabled us to choose sixteen cities in eight member states of the European Union (see Appendix D). In the selection of these cities some tentative or even intuitive criteria have been used:

- Size. In each country one city with less than 100.000 inhabitants was selected, as well as one with at least 200.000 inhabitants. There are, however, exceptions to this rule.
- Geography. For mere practical reasons the cities had to be near each other. Again, some exceptions have been made (in Germany and Spain).
- State tradition. This is the most important criterion. Loughlin and Peters

(1997) suggest that four state traditions can be distinguished in Europe, each with different effects on the position of local government (see section 3, below). We accept this distinction as a starting point. In this research project, each state tradition is represented by two states. In the next section, the state traditions will be elaborated on.

Almost all the selected cities were very helpful in receiving the research team at short notice. One city unfortunately did not respond.

In all the cities, interviews were intended to be held with:

- The Chief Executive Official, the highest ranking civil servant
- A civil servant who deals with citizen participation in particular
- A politician: an alderman, a member of the executive board or a council member
- A scientist, to reflect on the results

Due to local and practical reasons, in some cases the interview plan was changed.

One of the many difficulties in international comparative research is the lack of detailed knowledge of the country under analysis. During this study, the researchers have been well aware of this and, also, of the bias likely to result from the intimate knowledge of the Dutch situation. The team has taken some measures in order to diminishing the risk of bias. Firstly, knowledge was gained about the local government of the country to be visited. The country reports are part of the chapters in this book. Secondly, contact was kept with the international partners. And thirdly, we made the knowledge of the Dutch situation explicit; it will be shared with the readers of this book.

State traditions

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Loughlin and Peters have tried to present a comprehensive overview of state traditions in Western Europe; 'traditions' are described as "sets of institutions and cultural practices that constitute a set of expectations about behaviour" (Loughlin and Peters, 1997). They suggest four major traditions to be distinguished: the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the Scandinavian tradition, the Germanic tradition, and the French (Napoleonic) tradition.

	Anglo Saxon	Germanic	French	Scandinavian
Is there a legal basis for the 'state'?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-society relations	Pluralistic	Organistic	Antagonistic	Organistic
Form of political organization	Limited federalism	Integral / organic federalist	Jacobean, 'one and indivisible'	Decentralized unitary
Basis of policy style	Incrementalist, 'muddling through'	Legal corporatist	Legal technocratic	Consensual
Form of decentralization	'State power' (US); local government (UK)	Co-operative federalism	Regionalized unitary state	Strong local autonomy
Dominant approach to discipline of public administration	Political science / sociology	Public law	Public law	Public law (Sweden); organization theory (Norway)

Table 1 State traditions (Loughlin and Peters, 1997)

The Loughlin-Peters categorisation is not the only one. Norton (1997) has described five world state traditions, three of which are European: South European, North European, and the British tradition (the two non-European traditions being the North American and Japanese ones). Without accepting the Loughlin-Peters distinction as the last word on the subject, we have used it as a starting point for the selection of countries for our exploratory project. We have decided to select two countries from each tradition. On this basis, and also on some pragmatic grounds (i.e. interested colleagues available), we have chosen to study cities in the Irish Republic, Great Britain (in particular England), Sweden, Finland, Germany, Belgium (in particular Flanders), France and Spain.³

Background: interactive government in the Netherlands 4

In the opening section of this chapter, we referred to the Dutch background of the research team. Since this background and knowledge of specific Dutch experiences will play a role in the way the team perceives the developments in other countries, it may be worthwhile to devote some attention to some of these Dutch experiences. Especially experiments in what is called ‘interactive governance’ are relevant in this respect.

As indicated above, two strategies of democratic reform can be observed in the Netherlands: perfecting representative government and enhancing participatory democracy. Of course, these strategies are not mutually exclusive: instruments from the perfecting strategy can be combined with techniques of stimulating participatory democracy. This can be formulated even in stronger terms: the two strategies can be seen as complementary.

The pure form of representative democracy will always show deficiencies when applied in practice, deficiencies such as a lack of responsiveness to minorities, small groups or individual interests. It is common knowledge that, because of this, the representative system needs some form of addition, to facilitate the direct influence of citizens and organisations on the policy process. The same applies to the ideal of direct or participatory democracy: direct democracy is generally seen as a strategy that does not work in the practice of big government systems like states and (most) cities.

As a result, we usually find elements of both strategies in projects of democratic reform. Nevertheless, it is often possible to characterise projects as being predominantly influenced by one of these two strategies. In the Netherlands, a substantial number of local communities and local authorities have recently been experimenting along the lines of participatory democracy. Without concluding that this is a dominant trend, it can be observed that these experiments colour the Dutch debate on democratic reform. Discussing democratic reform in the Netherlands therefor usually involves discussions on the relevance and possibilities of techniques of direct democracy like the referendum, or the prospects of using information and communication technology (ICT) in collective decision-making, or a transfer of some power to self-governing neighbourhoods or associations.

As examples of introducing such measures, the so-called experiments in interactive governance deserve especial attention. A process of interactive governance implies that the involvement of citizens in the policy-making process goes much further than simply formulating their interests or preferences. Interactive governance means that policies are co-produced by citizens, politicians and civil servants, in a policy-making process that stresses the articulation of interests and decision-making by the citizens, the advisory role of the civil service and the setting of conditions by (elected) politicians.

When dealing with a certain policy problem in an interactive way, groups of interested citizens are stimulated to meet and formulate the problem as they see it. Politicians are required to formulate general principles of local policy that have to be observed (finances, over-all urban plans, etc.). Civil servants are required to facilitate a dialogue between the interested citizens aimed at formulating concrete proposals to deal with the problem. In a well-structured process of interactive governance, the decision of the citizens involved are accepted as official policy, as long as the pre-determined general constraints (finances, linkages with wider urban policies) have been respected.

It is obvious that, in a process like this, the role of the elected representative undergoes a fundamental change: instead of being an important decision-maker, he becomes an actor who only marginally influences the policy-making process. Also, the role of the citizen changes: he is no longer simply a voter, a consumer of public goods or a source of policy relevant information (for example during the customary hearings). Instead, the citizen is treated as a creative policy- and decision-maker.

Of course, in many processes of policy-making this strategy may not be practical or even advisable. Especially decision-making concerning broad, general policies, applicable to the local community as a whole, may not be what one thinks of when contemplating interactive governance. Usually the technique is used for solving problems that can be identified as the problems of smaller groups, such as, for example, a street, a neighbourhood or a social category like a school community.

All the same, the interactive style is a challenge for traditional representative democracy for the following reasons:

1. It is an effort to radically decentralise decision-making power to those citizens directly involved.
2. It challenges elected politicians to redefine their role in such processes by

defining general conditions, stimulating the inactive citizens, stimulating discussions, suggesting solutions, and so on.

3. It repositions citizens as (partial) decision-makers and, in doing so, accepts some elements of direct democracy.
4. It implies that official decision-making, for example by the city council, limits itself to testing the decision of the citizens against pre-formulated general conditions.
5. It also implies, as can be observed, a stronger challenge to look for the possible contribution of this policy style to other policies. Can elements of interactive governance be used when formulating broader and more general policies? Can techniques of direct democracy be applied within the context of a basically representative system?

The interactive technique of policy-making may have substantial consequences for the future of democratic governance. Even if one resists the introduction of techniques like this, the challenge is still there. What better answer to the cleavage between citizens and their (local) government does representative government have in store? Is it possible to only use the strategy of perfecting representative democracy, without losing touch with some groups in our modern local communities, without a dramatic increase in alienation and a dramatic decrease in legitimacy? Maybe it is (as the example of the Belgian city of Genk seems to suggest, see chapter 7). And if it is, is it possible in all countries, in all circumstances; and what factors do play an important role in this? On the other hand, it might merely be a general feeling among local administrators that styles of governance like the one we described are necessary.

Whatever the answer is, the participatory challenge to representative democracy has to be answered.

About this book

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In a search for the answers to the issues raised, we will present studies on local government in, respectively, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, England, Germany, Belgium (Flanders), France and Spain.

It should be understood that these studies pretend in no way to be comprehensive with respect to local government in a certain country. They cannot even be con-

sidered complete studies of the cities under investigation. Our short, exploratory studies do not allow any of such claims to be made. Our purpose was merely to explore the debate on local government reform: how are problems perceived and defined, what solutions are proposed and used, what strategies are involved, and what kinds of results can be seen?

In each chapter, the authors will present some basic data on local government in the country studied, enough to understand what the situation is. The tradition of local government, politico-administrative system, and the relationships with higher levels of government will all be discussed. Next, the authors will turn to the issue of citizen-government relations. Problem definitions will be given and examples of strategies, projects and experiences reported. The size and nature of these reports depend, of course, on what the past and contemporary situation in the city under study.

In the final chapter, we will formulate some general conclusions. Does something like a Europe-wide process of democratic reform exist? Is this process stimulated by global discussions, like the ones on New Public Management or governance, or can we see nation-specific approaches? What types of problems do local authorities perceive, what solutions do they apply? Can we see trends in the attitude of municipalities towards increasing citizens participation and democratic renewal? Last, though not least, because this is an exploratory study, we will formulate further research questions.

1 This is our translation of the original Dutch term "vermaatschappelijking van het bestuur".

2 The Centre for Local Democracy is part of the research group 'Valuation in and of Public Administration' of the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

3 We were well aware of the fact that Loughlin and Peters state that Spain switched traditions from the French tradition to the Germanic, after the introduction of democracy.

